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DIGITAL DATING

The Quest for Love and Sex Online

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I always assumed online dating was for desperate middle-aged divorcees — certainly not college-aged students with active social lives like myself.

Walking into my freshman year at Iowa State three years ago, I was absolutely, positively certain there would be men lining up outside my dorm room waiting to ask me out on a date. No, I'm not vain, conceited or egotistical. Actually, I'm fairly modest and make an effort to avoid the typical college scene in Cam-pustown, where men and women can be found engaging in romantic rendez-vous on any given night.

I just figured that out of the more than 28,000 undergrads at Iowa State, there would be at least one person who wanted to catch a movie at the dollar theater or grab a coffee at The Café. I waited two years before a real fish came to bite my bait. There might have been a nibble or two every six months or so but I would always end up re-hooking my worm to cast it back into the dating pool. I was not alone in my preconceived notions about online dating. Several ISU students voiced similar thoughts.

A Good Last Resort?

"I think it's sort of sketchy," says Josh Bernhard, 24-year-old graduate student in statistics. "In college, having an on-line relationship is not ideal. I am surrounded by thousands of people, so if my database is better than any online website, I am going to use my resources."

"It's a good last resort if I were in my thirties," says freshman in pre-architecture Casey Tiedman. "There are plenty of worthy women all around me. I just haven't met them yet."

"I wouldn't use them, and I don't think it would be useful," says Debanjan Kumar Ghosh, 20, senior in chemical engineering. "There are already so many other sources to use for social interaction, such as bars, parties and clubs."

All three of these gentlemen have found some aspect of love on their own since first attending Iowa State.

Miles Hayes, 22, senior in mechanical engineering, also found a relationship during his junior year at Iowa State, but ended it when Audrey Smith, 21, caught his eye through Match.com. Surprisingly, they were not set up through the site. Audrey randomly discovered Miles' profile, which had been active for longer than a year and sent him an electronic wink, notifying him of her interest. Miles instantly responded with a six-page e-mail, and seven days later they had their first date at a public park walking their dogs, Aimee and Jayda. Before meeting Miles, Audrey had an active account



with Match.com for six months.

She has a unique history that ultimately forced her to venture toward online dating.

When Audrey was nineteen, she found herself pregnant. When she broke the news to the father, he bailed, leaving Audrey alone to raise her now 2-year-old boy, Ryland. Her situation has made it difficult to meet anyone, let alone a romantic interest. She tried the college dating scene of bars and parties, but few men were interested in her plus one, so she created her account on a whim. She finds online dating to be much different, more convenient, for her complicated life.

"In person it's more lust at first sight than love," says Audrey. "Online, everything is up front, to the point and out in the open, which makes the first date easier because you don't have to spend the time getting to know the other person." Audrey went on several first dates and invested more than fifty dollars before meeting Miles, but the money doesn't matter to her when looking at the bigger picture. "For only fifty dollars I found the person I want to

be with the rest of my life," says Audrey. "In the long run it was a great thing."

Audrey was the first and only girl Miles has pursued online. They will be celebrating their one-year anniversary March 1. Even though they live more than forty-five minutes away from each other, they still make their long distance relationship work. They have since been featured on Match.com as a successful "couple of the week."

The idea of a computer automatically matching me with someone had never before crossed my mind. The more I thought about it, though, the more convenient online dating started to sound. Why not have computers do the work for me, for free? It would certainly save a lot of time and money in the long run, if proven successful. Now, I'm not actively seeking an intimate or romantic relationship.

However, I wanted to see what all the fuss was about, so I dove into the realm of Internet dating. But before jumping into the dating pool, a single must ask themselves a series of questions:

Am I hard to please?

Do I have a lengthy list of dating "deal breakers"?

Can I afford to regularly buy drinks for other people at a bar?

Do I have trouble making up my mind?

If you can answer yes to any of those questions, consider giving it a try — a serious try. Hang up your beer goggles and save a few dollars at the bar trying to get with someone you won't remember tomorrow. You might find yourself with a more permanent relationship status.

eHarmony

I first sought out eHarmony because it's the most advertised and popular online dating service. Launched in 2000, eHarmony considers itself the "#1 Trusted Relationship Services Provider in the USA."

A 2009 survey conducted by Harris Interactive found that an average of 542 eHarmony members marry every day in the United States as a result of being matched on the site. With a statement such as that, I couldn't resist signing up. What I didn't realize was that I would spend the entire afternoon

and following morning completing the lengthy profile (eHarmony will not let anyone actively use its site until every question, text box and information insert about themselves is completed). There are twenty-nine dimensions of compatibility to complete. After several hours of filling out only the required questions, I had completed a mere 89 percent.

But alas, I abruptly hit a dead end. eHarmony fails to mention that full access to its services is not available until users subscribe to a membership ranging between \$25 and \$50 a month. Until that point of notification, users are only allowed to fill out their profile—that's it. No commitment, no communication. Yes, periodically eHarmony offers a free week of e-mail exchanges with chosen matches, but photographs and full profiles of those matches are not provided. Subscribed member or not, users are never allowed to search for other members' profiles.

Members must wait for their matches to be assigned to them, which are distributed once a week. Three matches are additionally offered daily if members are not satisfied with their weekly matches. Users' answers from eHarmony's initial questionnaire are used in comparison to others' answers to generate a percentage of compatibility. Thus, if users share a high compatibility, a recommended match will result. eHarmony can only recommend matches; it is up to the user to decide to independently continue the relationship through a series of online communication.

For someone who is not interested in what is recommended, the end result is a lot of frustrated waiting. Patience may be the key, but in the end, eHarmony's proven successful matches show that good things come to those who wait.

Plenty of Fish

Plentyoffish.com had the quickest application process. New members are required to provide a photo and answer questions about whether or not they own a car and their annual income. This is to match you with someone compatible with your income and model of vehicle of course, before officially allowing you to join the community. The service offers more options when choosing what type of relationship you're looking for such as talk/e-mail, hang, long term, dating,

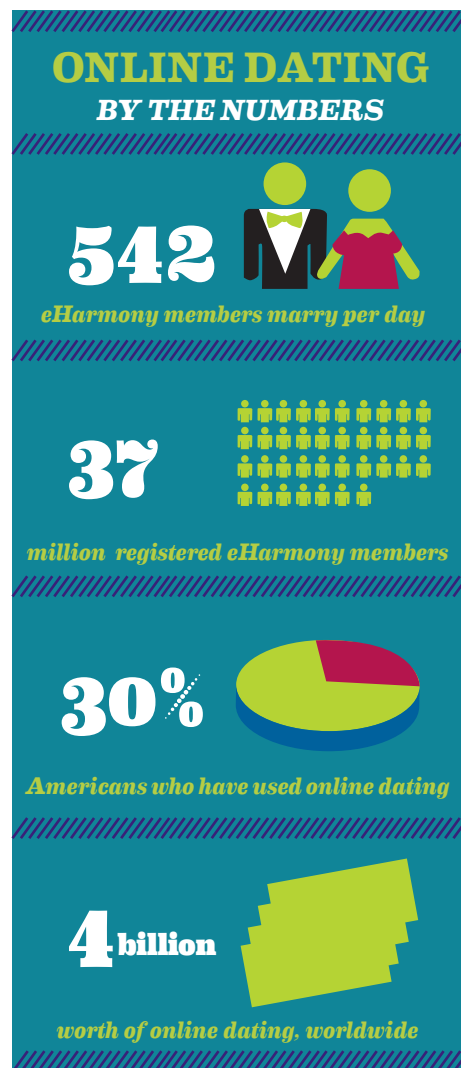
friends, intimate encounter and activity partner. Members are able to save users' profiles as "favorites" to periodically check up on—in other words, stalk—at later dates.

There are several additional features to this online dating service, which gives it a unique and more lifelike college setting. Besides being able to see who viewed your profile, members can select the "Date Night" tab to put your name on a wait list, with age and geographic location preferences, for other members to rate you and decide if you're worth requesting a date for Friday night. You can also filter through a collection of enlarged profile photos under the "Meet Me" tab deciding, based upon looks only, whether you want to meet them in person or not. If you select option "yes," your name is put on another list, accessible only to that specific user, for them to choose if they want to accept your request to meet.

These options make finding a last-minute date and hook up quicker and simpler in a less personal way. It only took me a mere five to ten minutes to sign up and complete my profile and compatibility test: the "Relationship Chemistry Predictor." The predictor is only forty-eight questions long, which is significantly less compared to eHarmony's twenty-four page relationship questionnaire. Once filling out the predictor, the "Chemistry" tab at the top of the page shows what users share the highest percentages of fondness.

Forty-eight multiple-choice answers later, it was not minutes before I received my first e-mail from a male user in the Ames community. The subject in the e-mail was titled, "lookin' good." If that wasn't a sign in and of itself, the body of the first e-mail read, "so what are you lookin' for?" In my description, relationship status and profile I unmistakably spelled out I was not interested in a relationship, let alone anything casual. The message was ignored, and I continued scanning profiles for current ISU students to read their reasoning for creating an account. More often than not, "activity partner" and "intimate encounter" were listed far more than the "long term" and "dating" categories.

During this scanning process, four or five notifications popped up on my computer screen inviting me to engage in instant message conversations with



online users. I accepted one only to be bombarded with extremely blunt and personal questions as to why I was online and what my sexual orientation and boundaries were. I signed off, not sure I had found more than a handful of bottom feeders. Maybe if I were more into meeting random guys looking for a good time or local girls interested in secret experimentation, I would have been satisfied with the service; however, in the end, I had to remember that this site is free, and I got what I paid for.

Henry David Thoreau said it best, "Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after." Maybe it was not online dating that was causing me to reel in my pole empty handed. Through hours of Q and A, harassment from people I had never met and frustrated roadblocks, I found myself mustering up enough energy to give it one more shot.



Quick Facts WHAT THEY WANT

TURN ONs

Top 3 “Must-Haves”*

1. Sense of Humor
2. Chemistry
3. Affectionate

TURN OFFs

Top 3 “Can’t-Stands”*

1. Lying
2. Cheating
3. Rude

*both men and women
Source: eHarmony

OKCupid

OKCupid.com is another free online dating service. The layout was aesthetically pleasing to the eye and organized in a way that allowed users to select one-touch options rather than sorting through complicated drop menus. The text boxes had extended character limits and specific match questions to send to users prior to initiating personalized e-mailing to narrow potential candidates more quickly. A \$9.95 per month upgrade is available which removes ads, adds extra search filters, allows users to write reviews on other members’ profiles, add photos to private messages and increases inbox storage. OKCupid does send out suggested matches, but it does not limit members to specific profiles.

There is a search option that allows users to browse profiles based on specific limitations such as age, distance, gender and romantic preference. From there, OKCupid provides the users’ age, sex and location, along with their percentage of compatibility, when they were last online, their self-summary and an option to view their full profiles. Users are able to send e-mails to

whomever they choose, for free, without a maximum limit of messages per day.

As for ranges of profiles, OKCupid showed a substantial number of ISU profiles, both male and female, who were looking for a range of relationships. This is the best site for a college lifestyle. Whether you are enjoying the diversity of the stream or preying for a guppy or the big-kahuna, casting your pole out on this online dating service could have you out to sea on calmer waves.

The long term relationship I am currently in was not electronically matched by a machine. I didn’t find him through a website, and I certainly did not send him any roses. I may be hooked on someone, but chances are most college students will find themselves using their tackle boxes for catch-and-releases when fishing for a robotic romance. Put it this way: if you give a man a fish, he will eat for a day, but if you teach a man to fish, he will eat for a lifetime. The same goes for relationships. If you use an online dating service to find a relationship, you will only be satisfied for a day, but if you learn how to date, you may be satisfied for a lifetime. 